

Images as a support of past social moments' analysis: pilot test research from the Romanian population.

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Abstract: This article is a presentation of a preliminary study which aims at investigating relations between images, such as iconic representations of past social periods and the mass-media audience. We have used some images to draw out word associations. We operationalize this word in terms of 'centrality' in a hypothetical social representation (words with high frequency and importance) and we analyze the relation between this variable ('centrality'), on the one hand and the mass-media audience and other attitudes and variables on the other.

Key words: iconic representations, social representation, social memory, centrality

Some theoretical points

In the contemporary European psycho-sociologists' view (Hass, 1999, Neculau, 1999; Jodelet, 2000; de Rosa, 2004), the social representations (SR) are the constitutive elements of social thinking, together with social memory (MS). While social representations are specific for the present, defining collective and general perceptions belonging to some objects of present representation ("unemployment", "democracy", "privatization"), the social memory refers to collective representations of the past, as "objects of the memory" ("The communist period", "The events on December 1989", "The movement of the miners in 2000").

An important aspect that is worth analyzing refers to the extent in which the two components of social thinking, SM and SR, are fundamentally alike /different. Both concepts have been defined starting with the concept of collective representations proposed by E. Durkheim; both of them belong to social thinking. They are formed through the exchange of information and significances related to an object of analysis that is important for the subjects, and both of them are dependent on the social context in which the individual evolves. The main difference is that SR refers to the present themes of the representations (themes that have their own history, which have gone through several stages from their appearance on the social stage), while SM refers to themes which belong to the recent past or to a more distant one.

Generally speaking, the social representations (SR) are described as a structural assembly of values, notions and practices relating to the object of the representation or a dimension of the social environment (S. Moscovici, 1997) as a social-cognitive system that enables the survival of the individual in the society, the direction of behaviors and communication, as well as the selection of the responses to stimuli in an environment (Neculau. A., Curelaru M., 2004). SR

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depends on the social context in which the groups evolve; they are collectively generated, play an important role in defining and maintaining the social relations and they convey, sometimes directly, but most frequently indirectly, a certain social awareness (competence). Being shared by the members of large groups, SR helps them to understand and attach significance to different aspects of the social environment they live in, provide a meaning to this reality and to accommodate to changes. For example, the analysis of SR for a „democracy”, „market economy” or „corruption” it is important to understand how Romanians have adapted to changes that began in 1989. Such representations allow them to grasp the diverse stages in the formation and consolidation of the cognitive strategies used to adjust to the new socio - economic realities.

From a methodological point of view, according to one of the dominant orientations in the study of this concept (the ‘structuralism’ orientation), the contents of SR can be rendered obviously by the analyst, after a specific investigation (subjects are asked to associate words and order them in accordance with the awarded importance), in the form of a central nucleus (stable cognitive categories associated to the object of the SR that are characteristic for it) and marginal elements (more flexible descriptive categories that are easily influenced by the contextual or temporal changes). Through the central nucleus, SR preserves and transmits the elements of continuity and stability, while through the marginal elements; the same SR gets new nuances depending on the social context. This is why the SR of „poverty” could be different depending on the reference group (for example, it has different sensible marginal elements among people with low income compared to those with medium or high income) and it could „evolve” in time, depending on the social and historical events that the collectivity goes through. Referring to this last aspect, the fact that RS could be modified in time is widely accepted; in a first stage, the marginal elements can be modified gradually, and, in a second stage, some representative marginal elements can be included in the central nucleus in order to anchor the SR to a new context.

From our point of view, using the SR techniques in analyzing SM data is very useful, offering new possibilities in approaches to SM and interpreting these data in terms of social imaginary activated by stimuli-events. Taking into account all these observations, we have put into discussion the extent to which of the techniques can be used to underline and analyze the SR and how it can be used to analyze the contents of SM. Moreover, we have wondered whether there is a relationship between the data seen as social representations of the past (catching the social imaginary associated to these events) and those that are the expression of the analysis of the very same events from the accessibility and cognitive evaluation perspective. That is why we have initiated this research. In its first section we put into practice methodology similar to the one used in the analysis of the social representations (associated words and ranking them according to their importance), while in the second one we use a methodology centered on the cognitive aspects of

the evaluation of the same events (“details”, “surprise”, “intensity”, “the frequency of remembering”, “personal importance”, etc.)

At a conceptual level, the extent to which this approach modifies the existing paradigms or any changes, especially the ones related to the components of social thinking (SR and SM), still remain under discussion. We believe we will be able to draw pertinent conclusions in this direction only after having analyzed the same relations in new researches of the significant events of the socio – political past.

Some previous investigations, finding and hypothesis

A first research that took place in 2001 (873 subjects, general population) we intended to identify the way in which some of the most important events in Romanian history are defined and evaluated, as seen from a common sense perspective, belonging to the ordinary Romanian individual.

Taking in to consideration the most important event from previous 10 years, in the next research (875 subjects, general population) we were interested in identifying the cognitive, emotional and attitudinal variables related to three events prototypical for Romanian contemporary social life. Thus we proposed the analysis of the social imaginary associated to each of the three important events: “The presidential elections /2000”, “The last movement of the miners” /1999 and “The Pope’s visit in Romania” /2000. Moreover, we are interested in the analyzes of the relationship between the important elements of social imaginary schema (‘positive or negative character’ of the associated words and ‘centrality’ of the associated words in a hypothetical SR) as well as those belonging to the cognitive emotional and attitudinal variables used in describing and evaluating the stimulus-events.

Analyzing these data we finally could stress that the elements of the social imaginary associated to these events (in terms of SR or SM) dependent, mainly, on the personal importance given to these events, on the frequency of remembering through discussions with others or through the mass media audience, on the intensity of the others’ reaction and on the positive-negative character of the evoked words. If we were to analyze the same data in terms of SR, then all previous variables indicate a SR closer to a dominant one (a “stereotypical” one) or a secondary one (“dissident”) depending on the intensity the individual felt when experiencing the event or the one he/she gave to it. In such a context we wonder what the role of the mass - media is in forming representations about the past or the present and if there are any personal factors, which together with mass – media, have a decisive contribution to the formation of our representations. In the research designs shortly described up to now, the role of the mass – media has been ‘assessed’ through only one variable, that asks for the estimation of the frequency with which the subject had watched shows related to the analyzed event (on a scale of 7 points, 1 means not at all, 7 means very often).

As we have already underlined, the analysts of social thinking consider that the contents of social representations and social memory are formed through the exchange of information between the members of social groups, by sharing and

negotiating the individual meanings, by converting the scientific or abstract contents into ones that are accessible to the members of the group. But, this presumption related to the formation of the contents of social thinking was formulated long before, in a period when the mass – media did not have the impact it has now on individual thinking. These days the mass – media offers access to the most important events that take place at a world in real time and at a wide level. The information is brought “live” to us and very often succinctly interpreted. Such events, such as “The intervention in Afghanistan” (2001) or the “Intervention in Iraq” (2003) were broadcasted live, at a worldwide level, being at the same time surprisingly “standardized” and interpreted by the main television channels. In such a context, channels like „Al-Jazeera” are seen as „marginal” or exotic precisely because they were broadcasting from another point of view (the one sustained by another part of the Arabic world). Similarly, at a national level, political power can often impose a certain point of view which is transmitted implicitly or explicitly to the population and for the majority of the population it becomes the ‘official’ point of view. This kind of influence is slightly visible in countries with a veritable democracy, and it is more prevalent in countries where a party or a political group „dictates” the destiny of the nation (such as the example of the ex-communist countries), expressing themselves to some extent in all these contexts.

On the other hand, we don’t know how much modern people are interested, what their cognitive and social resources are necessary to work out the social information, to share it with others, negotiate meanings in order to reach the formulation of contents as those described by the social representations or the social memory. The contents of the social memory and of the social representations which begin to be more and more ‘dictated’ through the mass – media by a small group of people (analysts, commentators, politicians), often depending on the international socio - political context or the region of influence to which the country belongs. Taking into the account the fact that in a modern society people have less and less time to get informed, preferring the standardized and interpreted news. The fact that traditional practices have disappeared (the ones that allow for the sharing and negotiating of the meaning of the relevant social information), we see how new factors could influence the mechanisms of the SR and SM content formation.

Also considering the data of our research and the ideas above, we could presume that the formation of the contents related to the events of recent social memory or modern social representation, depends on several factors:

- the person’s interest in internal or international socio – political information;
- the time each person has to process the information of this kind, only to get or to exchange information;

- the personal context for receiving the information that depends on the influence of the reference group (family, friends, colleagues), as on the type of community to which the person belongs;
- the importance of the mass-media (especially television) for the people and how much trust they put in mass-media information.

These variables are interconnected and, together, they determine the individual processing of the socio – political information and the formation of opinions related to them. For example, people with low interest in socio-political events, little time to get informed and exchange information, with low social sharing context and high esteem for mass-media, information will adopt a 'stereotypical' social representation, similar to the one offered by the mass-media. The other one will have an 'atypical' social representation; the contents of the SR are more likely to be 'dissident' to the general perception.

Starting with these considerations, we have decided to use images and words as stimulus to elicit representations about the social past or up to date the object of representation (word associations), to codify these word in terms of 'centrality' in a hypothetical social representation (words with frequencies and importance'), We used this variable in relation to the mass-media and other attitude variables.

Method

This research procedure was applied on the group of participants described above, persons with different professional backgrounds. Students from the Faculty of Psychology obtained the participants' consent, explained the instructions and supervised the completion of the instrument. All 115 subjects filled in a questionnaire between 15th and 22nd April 2005.

Subjects

The research involved a total of 115 subjects, aged between 19 and 54 (average age 27.2, SD = 8.7); 29 of them were men (25.2 %), 86 women (74.2%); 87 subjects had graduated from high school (75.7%) and 28 from university (24.3 %).

Procedure

The questionnaire included two principal sections. In the first section we presented two images, symbols of the past and future social context. Firstly was the symbol ('coat of arms') from the 'Romanian Communist Party' and secondly the symbol of 'European Union'. In the same section we presented a two word stimuli (in capital letters), following the same dichotomy (past / present): 'DECEMBER 1989' and 'DEMOCRACY'. All our subjects were asked to give the first 5 words associated to these stimuli and to arrange these words in the order of their importance.



Figure 1. *The two symbols' stimuli and two words' stimuli used to elicit associations.*

In the second section we ask our subjects to evaluate some aspects in a simple 4, 5 or 6 point scale:

- 'patriotism' ('How proud are you to be a Romanian citizen?');
- 'intention to leave the country' ('If you could to choose your country, would you choose Romania?');
- 'time for information' ('Generally speaking, do you have time to read, to get information, to watch your favorite mass-media program?');
- 'social sharing' ('Generally speaking, do you talk with your friends, colleagues or neighbors about politics or political changes?');
- 'interest in socio-political news' ('Are you interested in politics and debates about political changes?');
- 'frequencies of using different sources of information (news paper, radio, TV, social sharing ('How frequently do you get information about what has happened in our country or in our world from?');
- 'proceedings/ debate shows preferences' (Do you prefer round-table talks about socio-political events to simple news?');
- 'trust in the mass-media information' ('In your opinion, is mass-media information trustful, reliable?').

Research variables

In this research we used the above presented variable as independent variables: 'patriotism', 'intention to leave the country', 'time for information', 'social sharing', interest in socio-political news', 'frequencies of using different sources of information', 'proceedings/ debate shows preferences', and 'trust in mass-media information', For all these variables we used a simple 4, 5 or 6 point scale.

As a dependent variable we used the variable named "centrality" which sums up, for each subject, the number of words they evoked, words belonging to a category with high frequency and importance. The 'centrality' is a variable on a 3

point scale: 0 - zero level of centrality; 1 - low level of centrality; 2 – high level of centrality.

Coding of the 'centrality' variable

In the first stage, having in mind the third objective of this research, we tried to identify categories candidate to centrality. We use those five words evoked by each subject as responses to the stimuli and personal importance associated to these words. Using procedures specific to SR, we identified the words that had high frequencies as well as high importance associated with the stimuli.

For example, in the case of the first image (the symbol of the 'Romanian Communist Party'), we analyzed a total of 544 words out of which we kept for our analysis a total of 456 (we eliminated words with frequencies of 1 and those that could not be included in other categories). All these were condensed (the consolidation meant grouping synonyms or expressions with similar meaning – that could not create a category themselves - into categories) in 15 categories, such as: communism, symbol, RCP, worker, socialism, dictatorship, Ceaușescu, poverty, etc.

In the case of the second image (the symbol of the 'European Union') a total of 546 words were analyzed out of which we kept a total of 356 condensed in 12 categories, such as: UE, democracy, globalization, freedom, integration, strivings, cooperation, prosperity etc. For the third stimulus (word 'Democracy') we analyzed a total of 566 words out of which we kept 297 distributed in 17 categories, such as: freedom, rights, prosperity, chaos, equality, corruption, change, liars, information, etc. Finally, in the case of the fourth stimulus (the word 'December 1989') we analyzed a total of 560 words out of which we kept 403 distributed in 18 categories, such as: revolution, Ceausescu, communism, change, pain, victims, heroes, afraid, coup d'etat, etc.

In the next step we computed the means and standard deviation for total frequency and total importance. After that we computed total frequencies, relative frequencies, total importance and relative importance, for each of the categories obtained through consolidation.

	Mean		Std. Deviation	
	Frequency	Importance	Frequency	Importance
Stimulus 1	30.4	86.86	24.53	60.13
Stimulus 2	29.66	82.5	33.26	71.81
Stimulus 3	17.47	45.29	25.07	44.96
Stimulus 4	22.38	62.33	18.64	38.87

Table 1. Means and standard deviation for total frequency and total importance.

For relative frequency accounting we used the total frequencies mean, so that the categories with total frequency under mean was computed by 0, and the categories with total frequency upper mean was computed by 1. The total importance was calculated by adding up the product between the partial frequency of one column and the rank importance for that category. The relative importance was computed as a division of total importance by the total frequency.

category	word1	word2	word3	word4	word5	TF	TI	RI	RIR	RFR	centrality
communism	60	16	6	5	3	90	395	4.39	1	1	1
symbol	10	12	14	14	18	68	186	2.74	0	1	0
RCP	8	4	3	5	2	22	77	3.5	1	0	0
worker	7	13	5	4	7	36	117	3.25	1	1	1
socialism	7	4	10	14	6	41	115	2.8	0	1	0
dictatorship	5	14	14	10	10	53	153	2.89	0	1	0
USSR	4	4	9	6	0	23	75	3.26	1	0	0
Ceauşescu	1	16	7	6	4	34	106	3.12	1	1	1
restrictions	1	5	3	13	10	32	70	2.19	0	1	0
celebrations	0	0	2	4	3	9	17	1.89	0	0	0
past	2	2	2	0	3	9	27	3	1	0	0
poverty	1	0	2	3	3	9	20	2.22	0	0	0
liar	2	0	2	1	0	5	18	3.6	1	0	0
violence	1	1	4	1	4	11	27	2.45	0	0	0
agriculture	0	3	2	3	6	14	30	2.14	0	0	0

Table 2. Example with analysis for the relative importance of the evoked words ('RCP simbol')

For example, the category "communism" (spontaneously evoked as a response to the first image stimulus) has, in the entire group, a total frequency (TF) of 90, distributed in the five columns / words. Multiplying each of the partial frequencies with their rank (for each column in part) and adding up the resulting products, we obtained a total importance (TI) of 395, that we divided by the total frequency of 90 and the result 4.39 represents the relative importance (RI). In the next step, for each category, we coded the relative importance and the relative frequency with '0' under the mean and with '1', the relative importance and the relative frequency upper mean. In these cases we used the mean of relative importance for the relative importance final coding (RIR) and mean of total frequency for relative frequency final coding (RFR). Finally, we computed the latest two columns and we coded the categories with high frequency and high importance with '1' (categories candidate to 'centrality' in a RS analyzes) and with '0' for the other categories.

The 'centrality' variables were used to operationalize the extent to which each subject evoked words that were more or less closer to the dominant representation, the 'stereotypical' one (shared by the majority of subjects) or words belonging to a secondary or 'dissident' representation. The variable named "centrality" sums up, for each subject, the number of words they evoked, words belonging to a category with high frequency and importance.

In the next section the categories evoked by the whole group will be presented, for each of the four stimuli, depending on the relative frequency and importance.

The comparative analysis of the cognitive categories candidate to 'centrality'

In the tables below we represented the categories which have result from each of the four stimuli, in a combination between high – low frequency and high – low importance.

These categories with high frequency and high importance are the ones defining the central nucleus and the marginal elements if we were to interpret all the elements in terms of SR. The problem is whether the objects of our representation fulfill the criteria for the objects of a representation, and whether they can really be interpreted in terms of SR.

Symbol of the 'Romanian Communist Party'	High importance	Low importance
High frequency	communism worker Ceaușescu	symbol socialism dictatorship restrictions
Low frequency	RCP USSR past liar	celebrations poverty violence agriculture
Symbol of 'European Union'	High importance	Low importance
<i>High frequency</i>	UE	symbol
<i>Low frequency</i>	freedom circle peace democracy	globalization integration hopes opportunities cooperation prosperity
'DEMOCRACY'	High importance	Low importance
<i>High frequency</i>	freedom rights	chaos
<i>Low frequency</i>	equality communication hopes access liar opportunities	prosperity change power information poverty revolution wrong perception corruption

‘December 1989’	High importance	Low importance
<i>High frequency</i>	revolution freedom Ceașescu	change democracy dead symbol
<i>Low frequency</i>	communism pain chaos coup d’etat	sang heroes fear terrorism strivings victory liar

Figure 2. *The category representations in a combination high – low frequency and high – low importance*

We don’t wish to argue on this subject, and we intend to be open to any other methodological and theoretical option, without submitting to any specific theoretical paradigm. That is why we prefer to stop at this level of analysis, without underlining the definition of the central nucleus and describing the marginal elements.

Maybe we are very restrictive when choosing our categories and coding the final variable (‘centrality’) or the number of our sample is very small so, we have a few categories with a high frequency and importance in our final tables. When we analyze the final sample (more than 500 subjects) we expect to have more general categories for each stimulus and, maybe, a complete distribution in each column from the tables above.

I remind you that our intention was not to define the general SR for each stimulus (as ‘central nucleus’ and ‘marginal element’), but to analyze the relationship between variable ‘centrality’ (word candidate to a hypothetical SR schemata in terms of central nucleus and marginal element) on one hand and mass-media audience and other attitudes variables, on the other.

The comparative analysis of the data using the ‘centrality’ variable.

Our presumptions were that the persons who (a) show a low interest in the socio – political life, (b) have little time to become informed or exchange information of this kind, (c) have a personal context that does not stimulate the sharing of information and (d) give a high importance and credibility to the information received through the mass – media, will adopt a social representation or form a social memory rather ‘stereotypical’, similar to the majority population, compared to the persons situated at the other extremes, a situation when the contents of the SR or SM are more likely “dissident”. From our point of view a ‘stereotypical’ social representation can be coded by a high number of words which

can be included in categories 'candidate to centrality' and an 'atypical' social representation can be coded by no words or low number of words which can be included in categories 'candidate to centrality'.

By analyzing the differences between those that evoke words closer to the dominant representations (the „stereotypical” representation) and those that evoke words belonging to a secondary representation (the „dissident” representation), and by using the Oneway ANOVA method and the Bonferroni test, we obtained a few significant statistical differences.

For the first stimulus (image / symbol of the 'Romanian Communist Party') the subjects that evoked spontaneously words candidate to centrality (2 word or more), in comparison to those evoking words belonging to a 'dissident' representation (which are not candidate to centrality), more frequently are used to getting information about the country or the world from discussions with the others ($F(2, 111) = 4.214, p < 0.01$).

For the second stimulus (symbol of 'European Union') we didn't find significant statistical differences between groups.

For the third stimulus (word 'Democracy') the subjects evoking words candidate to centrality in this representation (2 words or more), compared to those that don't, have more time to read, to get information, to watch their favorite mass-media program ($F(2, 111) = 3.153, p < 0.05$), get more frequently information about the country or the world, listen to the radio ($F(2, 111) = 3.201, p < 0.05$), and get less frequently information from discussions with the others ($F(2, 111) = 3.514, p < 0.05$).

As a response to the stimulus 4 (words 'December 1989'), subjects with no words belonging to the principal representation, get more frequently information about the country or the world by listening to the radio ($F(2, 111) = 5.390, p < 0.01$) or TV ($F(2, 111) = 4.536, p < 0.05$), compared to those whose words belong to the principal representation.

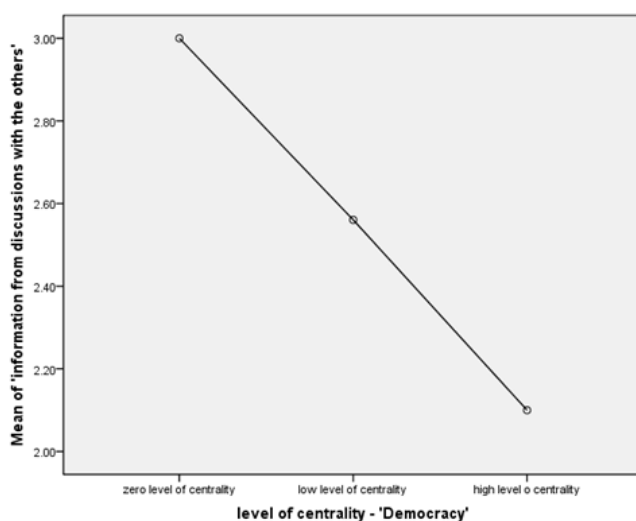


Figure 3. The relation between 'centrality' variable for democracy and 'frequency of getting information from discussions with the others' variable (1 – 'daily', 5 – 'never')

In a correlation analyzes we found other significant statistical relations between the 'centrality' variable and some attitudinal variables.

People with a high level of patriotism (1 – very proud, 4 – not so proud) give more words from categories 'candidate to centrality' for the 'December 1989' stimulus and for the general centrality score, in opposition to people with a low level of patriotism ($r = - .230$, $p \leq .05$). At the same time, they show little intention to leave the country (1 – yes, absolutely, 4 – never; $r = .491$, $p \leq .01$), they have more time to discuss with the others about politics or political changes (1 – very little, 4 very much; $r = - .234$, $p \leq .05$) and have high interest in socio-political news (1 – very little, 4 very much; $r = - .273$, $p \leq .05$).

Similarly, people who discuss more time with the others about politics or political changes (social sharing) give more words from these categories 'candidate to centrality' for 'December 1989' ($r = .224$, $p \leq .05$). At the same time, the more people share their information with others, the more they are proud to be a Romanian citizen ($r = - .234$, $p \leq .05$), the more they are interested in socio-political news ($r = .747$, $p \leq .01$), the more they prefer analyzes or debates related to socio-political events ($r = .336$, $p \leq .01$), instead of the general news.

Conclusions

First of all, our initial presumptions are not confirmed. On the contrary, discussions with the others, more time to read, to get information, to watch their favorite mass/media program, to listen to the radio or TV, seems to be related to a high number of the words from the categories candidate to centrality (defining the principal component of a social representation schema). Also, high level of patriotism and frequency of discussion with others is associated with more words from categories candidate to centrality for 'December 1980' stimulus.

There can be more explanations for these findings. First, maybe our presumptions are wrong, and the final analysis, with the help of correlations, linear regression and structural equations analyses will help us to identify another explicative model in order to understand the relationship between mass-media variables and interest for socio-political information, on the one hand, and content of social representation ('stereotypical' or 'atypical') on the other.

Second, maybe we are very restrictive when choosing our categories and coding the final variable ('centrality'). In the final analysis we will choose a large number categories and will try to find out if in the first analyze we introduced some biases in the content analyses.

Third, the number of our sample is very small, so some of relevant relation could not be produced at a significant statistical level. Moreover, in the first step we used qualitative data and the qualitative method to define the 'centrality' variable (quantitative data) and this can be sensible to bias in a small sample analysis. In the final analysis we will work with data from more than 500 subjects and we expect to have more general categories for each stimulus and a complete

distribution in each column of tables of the SR main elements (word with high/low importance and frequency) and other levels of significant statistical relations.

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